PHILIP STEELE

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

Author of "THE DANGER TRAIL," "THE HONOR OF THE BIG SNOWS," &c.

CHAPTER XIV.

What Came of the Great Love Experiment.

FOR an hour after he had gone to bed Philip lay awake thinking of the doctor's story. He dreamed of it when he fell asleep. In a way for which he could not account, the story had a peculiar effect upon him, and developed in him a desire to know the end. He awoke in the morning anxious to resume the subject with McGill, but the doctor disappointed him. During the whole of the day he made no direct reference to his mission in the North, and when Philip once or twice brought him back to the matter he evaded any discussion of it, giving him to understand, without saying so, that the matter was a closed incident between them, only to be reopened when he was able to give some help in the search. The doctor talked freely of his home, of the beauty and the goodness of his wife, and of a third member whom they expected in their little family circle in the spring. They discussed home topics—politics, clubs, and sport. The doctor disliked society, though for professional reasons he was compelled to play a small part in it, and in this dislike the two men found themselves on common ground. They became more and more confidential in all ways but one. They passed hours in playing cribbage with a worn pack of Pierre's cards, and the third night sang old college songs which both had nearly forgotten. It was on this evening that they planned to remain one more day in Pierre's cabin and then leave for Fort Smith.

"You have hope—there," said Philip in a casual way, as they were undressing.

"Little hope, but the search will begin from there," replied the doctor. "I have more hope at Chippewayan, where we struck a clew. I sent back my Indian to follow it up."

They went to bed. How long he had slept Philip had no idea, when he was awakened by a slight noise. In a subconscious sort of way, with his eyes still closed, he lay without moving and listened. The sound came again, like the soft, cautious tread of feet near him. Still without moving he opened his eyes. The oil lamp which he had put out on retiring was burning low. In its dim light stood the doctor, half dressed, in a tense attitude of listening.

"What's the matter?" asked Philip.

The professor started, and turned toward the stove.

"Nervousness, I guess," he said gloomily. "I was afraid I would awaken you. I've been up three times during the last hour—listening for a voice."

"A voice?"

"Yes, back there in the bunk I could have sworn that I heard it calling somewhere out in the night. But when I get up I can't hear it. I've stood at the door until I'm frozen."

"It's the wind," said Philip. "It has troubled me many times out on the snow plains. I've heard it wail like children crying among the dunes, and again like women screaming, and men shouting. You'd better go to bed."

"Listen!"

The doctor stiffened, his white face turned to the door.

"Good heavens, was that the wind?" he asked after a moment.

Philip had rolled from his bunk and was pulling on his clothes.

"Dress and we'll find out," he advised.

Together they went to the door, opened it, and stepped outside. The sky was thick and heavy, with only a white blur where the moon was smothered. Fifty yards away the gray gloom became opaque. Over the thousand miles of drift to the north there came a faint whistling wind, rising at times in fitful sweeps of flinty snow, and at intervals dying away until it became only a lulling sound. In one of these intervals both men held their breath. From somewhere out of the night, and yet from nowhere that they could point, there came a human voice.

"Pier-r-r-r-r-e Thoreau—Pier-r-r-r-e Thoreau—Ho, Pierre Thoreau-u-u-u!"

"Off there," shivered the doctor.

"No—out there," said Philip.

He raised his own voice in an answering shout, and in response there came again the cry for Pierre Thoreau.

"I'm right!" cried the doctor. "Come!"

He darted away, his greatcoat making a dark blur in the night ahead of Philip, who paused again to shout through the megaphone of his hands. There came no reply. A second and a third time he shouted, and still there was no response.

"Queer," he thought. "What the devil can it mean?"

The doctor had disappeared, and he followed in the direction he had gone. A hundred yards more and he saw the dark blur again, close to the ground. The doctor was bending over a human form stretched out in the snow.

"Just in time," he said to Philip as he came up. Excitement had gone from his voice now. It was cool and professional, and he spoke in a commanding way to his companion. "You're heavier than I, so take him by the shoulders and hold his head well up. I don't believe it's the cold, for his body is warm and comfortable. I feel something wet and thick on his shirt, and it may be blood. So hold his head well up."

Between them they carried him back to the cabin, and with the quick alertness of a man accustomed to every emergency of his profession the doctor stripped off his two coats while Philip looked at the face of the man whom they had placed in his bunk. His own experience had acquainted him with violence and bloodshed, but in spite of that fact he shuddered slightly as he gazed on the unconscious form. It was that of a young man of splendid physique, with a closely shaven face, short blond hair, and a magnificent pair of shoulders. Beyond the fact that he knew the face wore no beard he could scarce have told if it were white or black. From chin to hair it was covered with stiffened blood.

The doctor came to his side.

"Looks bad, doesn't he?" he said cheerfully. "Thought it wasn't the cold. Heart beating too fast, pulse too active. Ah—hot water, if you please, Philip!"

He loosened the man's coat and shirt, and a few moments later, when Philip brought a towel and a basin of water, he rose from his examination.

"Just in time—as I said before," he exclaimed with satisfaction. "You'd never heard another 'Pierre Thoreau' out of him, Philip," he went on, speaking the young man's name as if he had been accustomed to doing it for a long time. "Wound on the head—skull sound—loss of blood from over-exertion. We'll have him drinking coffee within an hour if you'll make some."

The doctor rolled up his shirt sleeves and began to wash away the blood.

"A good-looking chap," he said over his shoulder. "Face clean cut, fine mouth, a frontal bone that must have brain behind it, square chin——" He broke off to ask: "What do you suppose happened to him?"

"Haven't got the slightest idea," said Philip, putting the coffee pot on the stove. "A blow, isn't it?"

Philip was turning up the wick of the lamp when a sudden startled cry came from the bedside. Something in it, low and suppressed, made him turn so quickly that by a clumsy twist of his fingers the lamp was extinguished. He lighted it again and faced the doctor. McGill was upon his knees, terribly pale.

"Good heaven!" he gasped. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing, Phil—it was he! He let it out of him so unexpectedly that it startled me."

"I thought it was your voice," said Philip.

"No, no, it was his. See, he is returning to consciousness."

The wounded man's eyes opened slowly, and closed again. He heaved a great sigh and stretched out his arms as if about to awaken from a deep slumber. The doctor sprang to his feet.

"We must have ice, Phil—finely chopped ice from the creek down there. Will you take the ax and those two pails and bring back both pails full? No hurry, but we'll need it within an hour."

Philip bundled himself in his coat and went out with the ax and pails.

"Ice!" he muttered to himself. "Now what can he want of ice?"

He dug down through three feet of snow and chopped for half an hour. When he returned to the cabin the wounded man was bolstered up in bed, and the doctor was pacing back and forth across the room, evidently worked to a high pitch of excitement.

"Murder—robbery—outrage! Right under our noses, that's what it was!" he cried. "Pierre Thoreau is dead—killed by the scoundrels who left this man for dead beside him! They set upon them late yesterday afternoon as Pierre and his partner were coming home, intending to kill them for their outfit. The murderers, who are a breed and a white trapper, have probably gone to their shack half a dozen miles up the creek. Now, Mr. Philip Steele, here's a little work for you!"

MacGregor himself had never stirred Philip Steele's blood as did the doctor's unexpected words; but the two men watching him saw nothing unusual in their effect. He set down his ice and coolly took off his coat, then advanced to the side of the wounded man.

"I'm glad you're better," he said, looking down into the other's strong, pale face. "It was a pretty close shave. Guess you were a little out of your head, weren't you?"

For an instant the man's eyes shifted past Philip to where the doctor was standing.

"Yes—I must have been. He says I was calling for Pierre, and Pierre was dead. I left him ten miles back there in the snow." He closed his eyes with a groan of pain and continued, after a moment, "Pierre and I have been trapping foxes. We were coming back with supplies to last us until late spring when—it happened. The white man's name is Dobson, and there's a breed with him. Their shack is six or seven miles up the creek."

Philip saw the doctor examining a revolver which he had taken from the pocket of his big coat. He came over to the bunkside with it in his hand.

"That's enough, Phil," he said softly. "He must not talk any more for an hour or two or we'll have him in a fever. Get on your coat. I'm going with you."

"I'm going alone," said Phil shortly. "You attend to your patient." He drank a cup of coffee, ate a piece of toasted bannock, and with the first gray breaking of dawn started up the creek on a pair of Pierre's old snow shoes. The doctor followed him to the creek and watched him until he was out of sight.

The wounded man was sitting on the edge of the cot when McGill re-entered the cabin. His exertion had brought a flush of color back into his face, which lighted up with a smile as the other came through the door.

"It was a close shave, thanks to you," he said, repeating Philip's words.

"Just so," replied the doctor. He had placed a brace of short bulldog revolvers on the table and offered one of them now to his companion. "The shaving isn't over yet, Falkner."

They ate breakfast, each with a gun beside his tin plate. Now and then the doctor interrupted his meal to go to the door and peer over the broadening vista of the barrens. They had nearly finished when he came back from one of these observations, his lips set a little tighter, a barely perceptible tremor in his voice when he spoke.

"They're coming, Falkner!"

They picked up their revolvers and the doctor buttoned his coat tight up about his neck. For ten minutes they sat silent and listening. Not until the crunching beat of snow shoes came to their ears did the doctor move. Thrusting his weapon into his coat pocket, he went to the door. Falkner followed him, and stood well out of sight when he opened it. Two men and a dog team were crossing the opening. McGill's dogs were fastened under a brush lean-to built against the cabin, and as the rival team of huskies began filling the air with their clamor for a fight, the stranger team halted and one of the two men came forward alone. He stopped with some astonishment before the aristocratic-looking little man waiting for him in Pierre's doorway.

"Is Pierre Thoreau at home?" he demanded.

"I'm a stranger here, so I cannot say," replied the doctor, inspecting the questioner with marked coolness. "It is possible, however, that he is—for I picked up a man half dead out in the snow last night, and I'm waiting for him to come back to life. A smooth-faced, blond fellow, with a cut on his head. It may be this Pierre Thoreau."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the man kicked off his snow shoes and with an excited wave of his arm to his companion with the dogs, almost ran past the doctor.

"It's him—the man I want to see!" he cried in a low voice. "My name's Dobson, of the——"

What more he had meant to say was never finished. Falkner's powerful arms had gripped his head and throat in a vise-like clutch from which no smother of sound escaped, and three or four minutes later, when the second man came through the door, he found his comrade flat on his back, bound and gagged, and the shining muzzles of two short and murderous-looking revolvers leveled at his breast. He was a swarthy breed, scarcely larger than the doctor himself, and his only remonstrance as his hands were fastened behind his back was a brief outburst of very bad and very excited French which the professor stopped with a threatening flourish of his gun.

"You'll do," he said, standing off to survey his prisoner. "I believe you're harmless enough to have the use of your legs and mouth." With a comic bow the little doctor added, "M'sieur, I'm going to ask you to drive us back to Fort Smith, and if you so much as look the wrong way out of your eyes I'll blow off your head. You and your friend are to answer for the killing of Pierre Thoreau and for the attempted murder of this young man, who will follow us to Fort Smith to testify against you."

It was evident that the half-breed did not understand, and the doctor added a few explanatory words in French. The man on the floor groaned and struggled until he was red in the face.

"Easy, easy," soothed the doctor. "I appreciate the fact that it is pretty tough luck, Dobson, but you'll have to take your medicine. Falkner, if you'll lend a hand in getting me off I won't lose much time in starting for Fort Smith."

It was a strange-looking outfit that set out from Pierre Thoreau's cabin half an hour later. Ahead of the team which had come that morning walked the breed, his left arm bound to his side with a babiche thong. On the sledge behind him lay an inanimate and blanket wrapped bundle, which was Dobson; and close at the rear of the sledge, stripped of his great coat and more than ever like a diminutive drum major, followed Dudley McGill, professor of neurology and diseases of the brain, with a bulldog revolver in his mittened hand.

From the door Falkner watched them go.

Six hours later Philip returned from the east. Falkner saw him coming up from the creek and went to meet him.

"I found the cabin, but no one was there," said Philip. "It has been deserted for a long time. No tracks in the snow, everything inside frozen stiff, and what signs I did find were of a woman!"

The muscles of Falkner's fave gave a sudden twitch. "A woman!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, a woman!" repeated Philip, "and there was a photograph of her on a table in the bedroom. Did this Dobson have a wife?"

Falkner had fallen a step behind him as they entered the cabin.

"A long time ago—a woman was there," he said. "She was a young woman, and—and almost beautiful. But she wasn't his wife."

"She was pretty," replied Philip, "so pretty that I brought her picture along for my collection at home." He looked about for McGill. "Where's the doctor?"

Falkner's face was very white as he explained what had happened during the other's absence.

"He said that he would camp early this afternoon so that you could overtake them," he finished after he had described the capture and the doctor's departure. "The doctor thought you would want to lose no time in getting the prisoners to Fort Smith, and that he could get a good start before night. To-morrow or the next day I am going to follow with the other team. I'd go with you if he hadn't commanded me to remain here and nurse my head for another twenty-four hours."

Philip shrugged his shoulders, and the two had little to say as they ate their dinners. After an hour's rest he prepared a light pack and took up the doctor's trail. Inwardly he rankled at the unusual hand which the little professor was playing in leaving Pierre's cabin with the prisoners, and yet he was confident that McGill would wait for him. Mile after mile he traveled down the creek. At dusk there was no sign of his new friend. Just before dark he climbed a dead stub at the summit of a high ridge and half a dozen miles of the unbroken barren stretched out before his eyes. At 6 o'clock he stopped to cook some tea and warm his meat and bannock. After that he traveled until 10 o'clock, then built a big fire and gave up the pursuit until morning. At dawn he started again, and not until the forenoon was half gone did he find where the doctor had stopped to camp.

The ashes of his fire were still warm beneath and the snow was trampled hard around them. In the north the clouds were piling up, betokening a storm, such as it was not well for a man in Philip's condition of fatigue to face. Already some flavor of the approaching blizzard was carried to him on the wind.

So he hurried on. Fortunately, the storm died away after an hour or two of fierce wind. Still he did not come up with McGill, and he camped again for the night, cursing the little professor who was racing on ahead of him.

It was noon of the following day when he came in sight of the few log cabins at Fort Smith, situated in a treeless and snow-smothered sweep of the plain on the other side of the Slave. He crossed the river and hurried past the row of buildings that led to post-headquarters. In front of the company office were gathered a little crowd of men, woman, and children. He pushed his way through and stopped at the bottom of the three log steps which led up to the door.

At the top was Prof. McGill, coming out. His face was a puzzle. His eyes had in them a stony stare as he gazed down at Philip. Then he descended slowly, like one moving in a dream.

"Good heavens," he said huskily, and only for Philip's ears, "do you know what I've done, Phil?"

"What?" demanded Philip.

The doctor came down to the last step.

"Phil," he whispered, "that fellow we found with a broken head played a nice game on me. He was a criminal, and I've brought back to Fort Smith no less person than the man sent out to arrest him, Corp. Dobson, of the mounted police, and his driver, Francois Something-or-Other. Heavens, ain't it funny?"

That same afternoon Corp. Dobson and the half-breed set out again in quest of Falkner, and this time they were accompanied by Pierre Thoreau, who learned for the first time what had happened in his cabin. The doctor disappeared for the rest of the day, but early the next morning he hunted Phil up and took him to a cabin half a mile down the river. A team of powerful dogs, an unusually large sledge, and two Indians were at the door.

"I bought 'em last night," explained the doctor, "and we're going to leave for the south to-day."

"Giving up your hunt?" asked Philip.

"No, it's ended," replied McGill in a matter-of-fact way. "It ended at Pierre Thoreau's cabin. Falkner was the third man to work out my experiment."

Philip stopped in his tracks, and the doctor stopped, and turned toward him.

"But the third—" Philip began.

The little doctor continued to smile.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Philip," he quoted, "than are dreamed of in your philosophy. This love of experiment has turned out wrongly, as far as preconceived theories are concerned, but when I think of the broader, deeper significance of it all I am—pleased is not the word."

"What I can't see—" Philip was stopped by the doctor's lifted hand.

"You see, I am relying on your word of honor, Phil," he explained, laughing softly at the amazement which he saw in the other's face. "It's all so wonderful that I want you to know the end of it, and how happily it has turned out for me—and the little woman waiting for me back home. It was I and not Falkner who cried out just before you turned the lamp-wick down. A letter had fallen from his coat pocket, and it was one of my letters—sent through my agent. Understand? I sent you for the ice, and while you were gone I told him who I was, and he told me why I had never heard from him, and why he was in Pierre Thoreau's cabin. My agent had sent him north with $500 as a first payment. To cut a long story short, he got into a card game in Prince Albert—as the best of us do at times—and as a result become mixed up in a quarrel, in which he pretty nearly killed a man. They've been after him ever since, and almost had him when we found him, injured by a blow which he received in an ugly fall earlier in the night. It's the last and total wrecking of my theory."

"But the girl—" urged Philip.

"We're going to see her now, and she will tell you the whole story as she told it to me," said the doctor, as calmly as before. "Ah, but it's wonderful, man—this great, big, human love that fills the world! They two met at Nelson House, as I had planned they should, and four months after that they smashed my theory by being married by a missionary from York Factory. I mean that they smashed the bad part of it, Phil, but all three couples proved the other—that there exist no such things as 'soul affinities,' and that two normal people of opposite sexes, if thrown together under certain environment, will as naturally mate as two birds, and will fight and die for one another afterward, too. There may not be one in ten thousand who believes it, but I do—still. At the last moment the man in Falkner triumphed over his love and he told her what he was, that up until the moment he met her he drank and gambled, and that for his shooting a man in Prince Albert he would sooner or later get a term in prison. And she? I tell you that she busted my theory to a frazzle! She loved him, as I now believe every woman in the world is capable of loving, and she married him, and stuck to him through thick and thin, fled with him when he was compelled to run—and her faith in him now is like that of a child in its God. For a time they lived in that cabin above Perre Thoreau's, and perhaps they wouldn't have been found out if they hadn't come up to Fort Smith for a holiday. Falkner told me that his pursuers would surely stop at Pierre's and so we fixed up that little scheme to get rid of you that you would in no way be to blame for what happened. He told me where I'd find his wife. By this time he has a good start for the States, and will be there by the time I get his wife down."

Philip had not spoken a word. Almost mechanically he pulled the photograph from his pocket.

"And this—" he said.

The doctor laughed as he took the picture from his hand.

"Is Mrs. William Falkner, Phil. Come in. I'm anxious to have you meet her."

CHAPTER XV.

Philip's Last Assignment.

PHILIP, instead of following the doctor, laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Wait!" he said.

Something in the seriousness of his manner drew a quick look of apprehension over the other's face.

"I want to talk with you," continued Philip. "Let us walk a little way down the trail."

The doctor eyed him suspiciously as they turned away from the cabin.

"See here, Phil Steele," he said, and there was a hard ring in his voice, "I've had all sorts of confidence in you, and I've told you more, perhaps, than I ought. I don't suppose you have a suspicion that you ought to break it?"

"No, it isn't that," replied Philip, laughing a little uneasily. "I'm glad you got away with Falkner, and so far as I am concerned no one will ever know what has happened. It's I who want to place a little confidence in you now. I am positively at my wits' end, and all over a situation which seems to place you and me in a class by ourselves—sort of brothers in trouble, you know," and he told McGill, briefly, of Isobel, and his search for her.

"I lost them between Lac Bain and Fort Churchill," he finished. "The two sledges separated, one continuing to Churchill, and the other turning into the south. I followed the Churchill sledge—and was wrong. When I came back the snow had covered the other trail."

The little professor stopped suddenly and squared himself directly in Philip's path.

"You don't say!" he gasped. There was a look of amazement on his face.

"What a wonderfully little world this is, Phil," he added, smiling in a curious way. "What a wonderfully little world it is! It's only a playground, after all, and the funny part of it is that it is not even large enough to play a game of hide-and-seek in, successfully. I've proved that beyond question. And here—you—"

"What?" demanded Philip, puzzled by the other's attitude.

"Well, you see, I went first to Nelson House," said McGill, "and from there up to the Hudson's Bay Company's post in the Cochrane River, hunting for Falkner and this girl—a man and a woman. And at the Cochrane Post a Frenchman told me that there was a strange man and woman up at Lac Bain, and I set off for there. That must have been just about the time you were starting for Churchill, for on the third day up I met a sledge that turned me off the Lac Bain trail to take up the nearer trail to Chippewayan. With this sledge were the two who had been at Lac Bain, Col. Becker, and his daughter."

For a moment Philip could not speak. He caught the other's hand excitedly.

"You—you found where they were going?" he asked, when McGill did not continue.

"Yes. We ate dinner together, and the colonel said they were bound for Nelson House, and that they would probably go from there to Winnipeg. I didn't ask which way they would go."

"From Nelson House it would be by the Saskatchewan and Le Pas trail," cried Philip. He was looking straight over the little doctor's head. "If it wasn't for this damnable De Bar—whom I ought to go after again—"

"Drop De Bar," interrupted McGill quietly. "He's got too big a start of you, anyway—so what's the use? Drop 'im. I dropped a whole lot of things when I came up here."

"But the law—"

"Damn the law!" exploded the doctor with unexpected vehemence. "Sometimes I think the world would be just as happy without it."

Their eyes met, sharp, and understanding.

"You're a professor in a college," chuckled Philip, his voice trembling again with hope and eagerness. "You ought to know more than I do. What would you do if you were in my place?"

"I'd hustle for a pair of wings and fly," replied the little professor promptly. "Good Lord, Phil—if it was my wife—and I hadn't got her yet—I wouldn't let up until I'd chased her from one end of the earth to the other. What's a little matter of duty compared to that girl hustling toward Winnipeg? Next to my own little girl at home she's the prettiest thing I ever laid my eyes on."

Philip laughed aloud.

"Thanks, McGill. By heaven, I'll go! When do you start?"

"The dogs are ready, and so is Mrs. William Falkner."

Philip turned about quickly.

"I'll go over and say good-by to the detachment, and get my pack," he said over his shoulder. "I'll be back inside of half an hour."

It was a slow trip down. The snow was beginning to soften in the warmth of the first spring suns by the time they arrived at Lac la Crosse. Two days before they reached the post at Montreal Lake, Philip began to feel the first discomfort of a strange sickness, of which he said nothing. But the sharp eyes of the doctor detected that something was wrong, and before they came to Montreal House he recognized the fever that had begun to burn in Philip's body.

"You've set too fast a pace," he told him. "It's that—and the blow you got when De Bar threw you against the rock. You'll have to lay up for a spell."

In spite of his protestations, the doctor compelled him to go to bed when they arrived at the post. He grew rapidly worse, and for five weeks the doctor and Falkner's wife nursed him through the fever. When they left for the South, late in May, he was still too weak to travel, and it was a month later before he presented himself, pale and haggard, before Inspector MacGregor at Prince Albert. Again disappointment was awaiting him. There had been delay in purchasing his discharge, and he found that he would have to wait until August. MacGregor gave him a three weeks' furlough, and his first move was to go up to Etomami and Le Pas. Col. Becker and Isobel had been at those places six weeks before. He could find no trace of their having stopped at Prince Albert. He ran down to Winnipeg and spent several days in making inquiries which proved the hopelessness of any longer expected to find Isobel in Canada. He assured himself that by this time they were probably in London and he made his plans accordingly. His discharge would come to him by the 10th of August, and he would immediately set off for England.

Upon his return to Prince Albert he was detailed to a big prairie stretch of country where there was little to do but wait. On the first day of August he was at Hymers when the Limited plunged down the embankment into Blind Indian River. The first word of it came over the wire from Bleak House Station a little before midnight, while he and the agent were playing cribbage. Pink-cheeked little Gunn, agent, operator, and one-third of the total population of Hymers, had lifted a peg to make a count when his hand stopped in mid-air, and with a gasping break in his voice he sprang to his feet.

The instrument on the little table near the window was clicking frantically. It was Billinger, at Bleak House, crying out for headquarters, clear lines, the right of way. The Transcontinental—engine, tender, baggage car, two coaches and a sleeper, had gone to the devil. Those, in his excitement, where his first words. From 50 to 100 were dead. Gunn almost swore Billinger's next words to the line. It was not an accident! Human hands had torn up three sections of rail. The same human hands had rolled a two-ton bowlder in the right of way. He did not know whether the express car—or what little remained of it—had been robbed or not.

From midnight until 2 o'clock the lines were hot. A wrecking train was on its way from the east, another from division headquarters to the west. Ceaselessly headquarters demanded new information, and bit by bit the terrible tragedy was told even as the men and women in it died and the few souls from the prairies around Bleak House Station fought to save lives. Then a new word crept in on the wires. It called for Philip Steele at Hymers. It commanded him in the name of Inspector MacGregor, of the Royal Mounted, to reach Bleak House Station without delay. What he was to do when he arrived at the scene of the wreck was left to his own judgment.

The wire from MacGregor aroused Philip from the stupor of horror into which he had fallen. Gunn's girlish face was as white as a sheet.

"I've got a jigger," he said, "and you can take it. It's forty miles to Bleak House and you can make it in three hours. There won't be a train for six."

Philip scribbled a few words for MacGregor and shoved them into Gunn's nervous hand. While the operator was sending them off he rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and buckled on his revolver belt. Then Gunn hurried him through the door and they lifted the velocipede on the track.

"Wire Billinger I'm coming," called back Philip as Gunn started him off with a running shove.

CHAPTER XVI.

A Lock of Golden Hair.

AS the sun was rising in a burning August glare over the edge of the parched prairie, Philip saw ahead of him the unpainted board shanty that was called Bleak House Station, and a few moments later he saw a man run out into the middle of the track and stare down at him from under the shade of his hands. It was Billinger, his English-red face as white as he had left Gunn's, his shirt in rags, arms bare, and his tremendous blond mustaches crisped and seared by fire. Close to the station, fastened to posts, were two saddle-horses. A mile beyond these things a thin film of smoke clouded the sky.

As the jigger stopped Philip jumped from his seat and held out a blistered hand. "I'm Steele—Philip Steele, of the Northwest Mounted."

"And I'm Billinger—agent," said the other. Philip noticed that the hand that gripped his own was raw and bleeding. "I got your word, and I've received instructions from the department to place myself at your service. My wife is at the key. I've found the trail, and I've got two horses. But there isn't another man who'll leave up there for love o' God or money. It's horrible! Two hours ago you'd 'ave heard their screams from where you're standing—the hurt, I mean. They won't leave the wreck—not a man, and I don't blame 'em."

A pretty, brown-haired young woman had come to the door and Billinger ran to her. "Good-by," he cried, taking her for a moment in his big arms. "Take care of the key!" He turned as quickly to the horses, talking as they mounted. "It was robbery," he said—and they set off at a canter, side by side. "There was two hundred thousand in currency in the express car, and it's gone. I found their trail this morning, going into the North. They're hitting for what we call the Bad Lands over beyond the Coyote, twenty miles from here. I don't suppose there's any time to lose——"

"No," said Philip. "How many are there?"

"Four—mebby more."

Billinger started his horse into a gallop and Philip purposely held his mount behind to look at the other man. The first law of MacGregor's teaching was to study men, and to suspect. It was the first law of the splendid service of which he was a part—and so he looked hard at Billinger. The Englishman was hatless. His sandy hair was cropped short, and his mustaches floated out like flexible horns from the sides of his face. His shirt was in tatters. In one piece it was ripped clean of the shoulder and Philip saw a purplish bruise where the flesh was bare. He knew these for the marks of Billinger's presence at the wreck. Now the man was equipped for other business. A huge "forty-four" hung at his waist, a short carbine swung at his saddle-bow; and there was something in the manner of his riding, in the hunch of his shoulders, and in the vicious sweep of his long mustaches, that satisfied Philip he was a man who could use them. He rode up alongside of him with a new confidence. They were coming to the top of a knoll; at the summit Billinger stopped and pointed down into a hollow a quarter of a mile away.

"It will be a loss of time to go down there," he said, "and it will do no good. See that thing that looks like a big log in the river? That's the top of the day coach. It went in right side up, and the conductor—who wasn't hurt—says there were twenty people in it. We watched it settle from the shore, and we couldn't do a thing—while they were dying in there like so many caged rats! The other coach burned, and that heap of stuff you see there is what's left of the Pullman and the baggage car. There's twenty-seven dead stretched out along the track, and a good many hurt. Great heavens, listen to that!"

He shuddered, and Philip shuddered, at the wailing sound of grief and pain that came up to them.

"It'll be a loss of time—to go down," repeated the agent.

"Yes, it would be a loss of time," agreed Philip.

His blood was burning at fever heat when he raised his eyes from the scene below to Billinger's face. Every fighting fiber in his body was tingling for action, and at the responsive glare which he met in Billinger's eyes he thrust his hand half over the space that separated them.

"We'll get 'em, Billinger," he cried. "By God, we'll get 'em!"

There was something ferocious in the crush of the other's hand. The Englishman's teeth gleamed for an instant between his seared mustaches as he heeled his mount into a canter along the back of the ridge. Five minutes later the knoll dipped again into the plain and at the foot of it Billinger stopped his horse for a second and pointed to fresh hoof-marks in the prairie sod. Philip jumped from his horse and examined the ground.

"There are five in the gang, Billinger," he said shortly. "All of them were galloping—but one." He looked up to catch Billinger leaning over the pommel of his saddle staring at something almost directly under his horse's feet.

"What's that?" he demanded. "A handkerchief?"

Philip picked it up—a dainty bit of fine linen, crumpled and sodden by dew, and held it out between the forefingers and thumb of both hands.

"Yes, and a woman's handkerchief. Now what the devil——"

He stopped at the look in Billinger's face as he reached down for the handkerchief. The square jaws of the man were set like steel springs, but Philip noticed that his hand was trembling.

"A woman in the gang," he laughed as Philip mounted.

They started out at a canter, Billinger still holding the bit of linen close under his eyes. After a little he passed it back to Philip who was riding close beside him.

(TO BE CONTINUED NEXT SUNDAY.)

Potatoes Baked in Ashes.

Select and clean your potatoes before starting, carrying the fairest, smoothest and smallest eyed which you have. It is a nice piece of work to roast them in the ashes without burning. To do this perfectly you can put them in the coals with enough ashes over to prevent burning. They can also be safeguarded by wrapping in dampened paper or wrapping in large green leaves. When you think they should be done, rake out and test. If not done sufficiently return to the roasting bed again.

BRITISH BEAUTY RAPS QUEEN.

MRS. ALGERNON ASPINALL.

New York, Aug. 3.—"The Queen is not fond of Americans." This statement was made by Mrs. Algernon Aspinall, wife of the secretary of the West India Commission, and a noted beauty, who is stopping at the Hotel Vanderbilt. "It is too bad, too," she added. "But Queen Mary is old-fashioned in her notions, and wishes to maintain an English court slow, conservative, everything moving by rule and rote. That is why the English court, to put it mildly, is just a little bit discouraging toward the American who is not officially recognized at court."